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### Young Felix Dzerzhinsky and the Origins of Stalinism

**Citation for published version:**

Lauchlan, I 2013 'Young Felix Dzerzhinsky and the Origins of Stalinism' Edinburgh Research Explorer.  
<<http://www.research.ed.ac.uk/portal/en/publications/young-felix-dzerzhinsky-and-the-origins-of-stalinism%282fbef31b-b770-40aa-8a5a-252c06ca2134%29.html>>

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**Document Version:**

Peer reviewed version

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Single authored chapter in Markku Kangaspuro and Vesa Oittinen (eds.), *Essays on Stalinism* (Kikimora Press, Helsinki, 2013).

**Iain Lauchlan**

### **Young Felix Dzerzhinsky and the Origins of Stalinism**

At the time of his death in 1953 the question of Joseph Stalin's place in history tended to polarise opinion: to the majority he was either a communist messiah or gravedigger of the revolution. These two opposite viewpoints were, oddly enough, not entirely incompatible – hagiographies and demonologies shared one common feature: regardless of whether he was thought of as a great prophet or an evil trickster, they both viewed Stalin as the lynchpin of the ruling system of thought and statecraft in the Soviet Union. Hence this system was referred to both on the right and the left as 'Stalinism' (even if in Leon Trotsky's version the word signified that Stalin was merely the *embodiment* of a particular bureaucratic malaise). Consensus has slowly evaporated over subsequent decades, with some historians continuing to follow the Stalin-centred approach,<sup>1</sup> whilst others point to evidence that this ideology and system of government was never simply the work of one man.<sup>2</sup> The latter interpretation is supported by the fact that the leader himself did not appear to be particularly enthusiastic about the term 'Stalinism' when eager toadies, such as Lazar Kaganovich, began using it in the 1930s. And he may not have been entirely disingenuous when he famously told his son, 'I am not Stalin. Stalin is Soviet power.' Some historians have looked for a more nuanced account of the origins of Stalinism in the evolution of institutional procedures: viewing it as the product of certain practices common to governments in the modern world (particularly during periods of crisis in state formation).<sup>3</sup> Others trace the origins in the realm of ideas, viewing

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<sup>1</sup> See in particular Robert C. Tucker, 'Stalinism as Revolution from Above,' in Tucker, ed., *Stalinism: Essays in Historical Interpretation* (New York: Norton, 1977), p.78, for the argument that Stalinism was rooted 'in the mind and personality of Stalin.' On the centralized nature of the Stalinist state see Robert Conquest, *The Great Terror: A Reassessment* (London, 1990); Oleg V. Khlevniuk, *The History of the Gulag: From Collectivization to the Great Terror* (New Haven, 2004).

<sup>2</sup> Particularly J. Arch Getty, *Origin of the Great Purges: The Soviet Communist Party Reconsidered, 1933-1938* (Cambridge 1985).

<sup>3</sup> See for example, Paul Hagenloh, *Stalin's Police: Public Order and Mass Repression in the USSR, 1926-1941* (The John Hopkins UP, 2009); David R. Shearer, *Policing Stalin's Socialism: Repression and Social Order in the Soviet Union* (Yale UP, 2009); Peter Holquist, 'Violent Russia, Deadly Marxism? Russia in the Epoch of Violence,' *Kritika*, vol.4, no.3 (Summer 2003); idem, "'Information is the Alpha and Omega

Stalinism as the confluence of various creeds, an East-West fusion of Jacobinism via Marxism with Russian Orthodoxy, Autocracy and Nationality.<sup>4</sup>

These multi-causal explanations correspond at least in part to Trotsky's view on Stalin, 'it was not he who created the machine, but the machine that created him.'<sup>5</sup> However, this doesn't answer the question 'who made the machine?' Given the dictatorial nature of the regime, it is not surprising to find that a small group of senior Bolsheviks played a crucial role in the formation of Soviet statecraft. Richard Pipes has argued that biographical studies of Lenin are important because, 'October institutionalised, as it were, his personality...The Bolshevik party was Lenin's creation—as its founder he conceived it in his own image and, overcoming all opposition from within and without, kept it on the course he had charted. The same party, on seizing power in October 1917, promptly eliminated all rival parties and organisations... Communist Russia [was] from the beginning to an unusual extent a reflection of the mind and psyche of one man: his biography and its history are uniquely fused.'<sup>6</sup>

This observation, whilst at first merely seeming to shift blame from Stalin to Lenin, need not entail jettisoning the multi-causal explanation of Stalinism. The new Soviet government was built in just a few years under intense pressure of external invasion and internal opposition, in this milieu loyalty was considered the highest virtue a subordinate could possess, and so provincial Party bosses and the heads of the People's Commissariats, recruiting from scratch, chose people they knew they could rely upon: old comrades with shared background and beliefs, their kith and kin. Cadres decided everything. Consequently, the institutionalisation of personality did not stop at Lenin, all major Soviet institutions tended to reflect the personalities of their various founders. This explains the contradictory nature of Stalinism: there was no single self-replicating prototype of the ideal Stalinist official in the style of Goethe's enchanted broom, but rather a competing variety of them. Thus, Stalinism was never a static entity but rather a constantly shifting constellation of spheres of influence. At times the sorcerer's

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of Our Work": Bolshevik Surveillance in Its Pan-European Context,' *Journal of Modern History*, vo.69 (Sept. 1997).

<sup>4</sup> See for example, Erik van Ree, *The Political Thought of Joseph Stalin: A Study in Twentieth Century Revolutionary Patriotism* (London, 2002).

<sup>5</sup> Introduction to Leon Trotsky's unfinished pamphlet (interrupted by the infamous icepick), *Stalin: An Appraisal of the Man and His Influence* (1940).

<sup>6</sup> R.Pipes, *The Russian Revolution* (New York, 1991), p.341.

apprentice, Stalin, attacked this tendency, particularly when he criticised nepotism in government on the eve of the Great Terror: ‘Most frequently, workers are selected not according to objective criteria, but according to accidental, subjective, narrow and provincial criteria: so-called acquaintances are chosen, personal friends, fellow townsmen, people who have shown personal devotion, ... these comrades evidently have wanted to create for themselves conditions which give them a certain independence both from the local people and from the Central Committee of the Party.’<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, Stalin was more guilty than most in this regard: his inner circle were either comrades from the underground inside tsarist Russia (e.g., Molotov, Orjonikidze, and Vyshinsky) or men with whom he shared civil war experience (Kirov, Kaganovich, Voroshilov and Mikoian).<sup>8</sup> And even Stalin’s attempt to uproot these cliques in the Great Terror strengthened if anything the retreat into closed groups in the long run, as officials rebuilt patron-client networks to protect themselves from future denunciation and arrest.<sup>9</sup>

As these individual fiefdoms were formed by the highly personalised system of government, ‘accidental, subjective, narrow and provincial criteria’ had a decisive influence on the development of statecraft. In light of this, there is a third approach to analysing the origins of Stalinist system which takes into account *both* its polycentric genesis through state practices and ideas *and* the central role of personality, that is to trace its roots in the lives of other Stalinists. This third way could be pursued either through prosopography (viz., a collective study of the parallel lives of a group of individuals to draw a picture of the group mentality of the ‘iron cohort’ of Bolsheviks

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<sup>7</sup> J. V. Stalin, *Mastering Bolshevism* (New York 1937): pamphlet reproducing Stalin’s Report to the Central Committee, 3 March 1937, pp.13-14.

<sup>8</sup> For a persuasive argument that contrary to received opinion Stalin *did* protect his inner circle see T.H. Rigby, ‘Was Stalin a Disloyal Patron?’ *Soviet Studies*, vol.38 no.3 (July 1986), pp.311-324; & idem, ‘Early Provincial Cliques and the Rise of Stalin,’ *Soviet Studies*, 33 (Jan.1981), pp.3-28.

<sup>9</sup> For an excellent study of Dzerzhinsky’s possible resistance to the onset of Stalinism, which takes the view that these networks were living ‘on borrowed time’ by 1929 see Douglas Weiner, ‘Dzerzhinskii and the Gerd Case: The Politics of Intercession and the Evolution of “Iron Felix” in NEP Russia,’ *Kritika*, vol. 7, no.4 (2006), pp.759-791. On patron-client networks in general see Daniel Orlovsky, ‘Political Clientelism in Russia: The Historical Perspective,’ in *Leadership Selection and Patron-Client Relations in the USSR and Yugoslavia*, eds. T.H. Rigby & B. Harasymiri (London, 1983); & C.H. Fairbanks Jr., ‘Clientelism and Higher Politics in Georgia, 1949-1953,’ in *Transcaucasia: Nationalism and Social Change*, ed. R.G. Suny (Ann Arbor, 1983).

which created the Stalinist system),<sup>10</sup> or on a more modest level, and what I propose to do here, an individual case study.

The individual case study has the advantage of allowing for a closer psychological analysis of Stalinists, an approach which so far has mainly been applied to Stalin.<sup>11</sup> This is essential in understanding the Stalinist mindset because its greatest conundrum is psychological: ‘How?’ is a more important question than ‘Why?’ The reasons *why* state descended into a system of violent tyranny in the 1930s are fairly straightforward: the drive to transform society and the economy at breakneck speed, and the pursuit of internal enemies, both immediate and potential, to strengthen the Soviet Union in preparation for an imminent war. Yet many states in Europe pursued similar goals in a similar context at this time without resorting to violence on this scale. How was it that a group of apparently rational and even well meaning human beings sank to such levels of cruelty and delusion? How could they carry huge swathes of the Party and people with them in this venture? How did they arrive at the conclusion that the arbitrary blood purge was necessary to achieve apparently rational ends? To answer these questions requires psychological insight into how their minds worked.

The case of Felix Dzerzhinsky offers enlightenment in this regard for several reasons. His biography has been relatively neglected in English language publications,<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> On analysis of group psychologies see Peter Loewenberg, *Decoding the Past: The Psychohistorical Approach* (Berkeley, California UP, 1984), p.289. Aspects of prosopography can be found in George Leggett, *The Cheka: Lenin's Political Police* (Oxford UP, 1981); Paul Hagenloh, op.cit.; & Robert Thurston, *Life and Terror in Stalin's Russia* (Yale UP, 1996), passim.

<sup>11</sup> See: Gustav Bychkowski, ‘Joseph V. Stalin: Paranoia and the Dictatorship of the Proletariat,’ in *The Psychoanalytic interpretation of history*, ed. Benjamin B. Wolman (New York, Basic Books, 1971). For a general outline of this approach see: Peter Gay, *Freud for Historians* (Oxford University Press, 1985); Peter Loewenberg, *Decoding the Past: The Psychological Approach* (Berkeley, 1984). R.G. Suny, ‘Beyond Psychohistory: The Young Stalin in Georgia,’ *Slavic Review*, vol. 50 (Spring 1991) pp.48-58. Suny argues that whilst psychohistory is more or less discredited, psychology is still an important tool in understanding Stalinism once it takes into account culture and context.

<sup>12</sup> The most detailed Russian-language biography (focusing mostly though on his career as head of the Cheka) is A.M. Plekhanov, *Dzerzhinskii: Pervyi Chekist Rossii* (Moscow, 2007). One English language study of Dzerzhinsky's pre-1917 life does exist: Robert Blobaum, *Feliks Dzierzynski and the SDKPiL: A Study of the Origins of Polish Communism* (Columbia UP, New York, 1984). This provides an excellent overview of sources in Polish, but has used none of the Russian sources. There are numerous Polish-language biographies of Dzerzhinsky. Most notably: Jerzy Ochmanski, *Feliks Dzierzynski, 1877-1926* (Poznan, 1977); Jan Sobczak, *Feliks Dzierzynski romantyk rewolucji* (Warsaw, 1974); Janusz Teleszynski, *Gorejacy plomien: Feliks Dzierzynski, 1877-1926* (Warsaw, 1977); T. Daniszewski, *Feliks Dzierzynski nieugiety bojownik o zwyciestwo socjalizmu* (Warsaw, 1951).

and there are now ample archival materials available on him,<sup>13</sup> a large portion of which is of a highly personal nature.<sup>14</sup> Most importantly of all he was the chief architect of the original punitive apparatus that played a central role in the Stalinist revolution.<sup>15</sup> George Leggett's study of the creation and evolution of the Cheka remains to this day the best single source on the earliest years of the Soviet security police, in it he argued that 'all evidence points to Dzerzhinsky being the author of the Vecheka concept... On the consistent showing of Lenin's pre-October doctrine, nothing could have been further from his intention, at that time, than the introduction of a political police system.'<sup>16</sup> The chekist system improvised by Dzerzhinsky was a governmental ethos which seemed to predate, anticipate and even create Stalinism. It was proto-Stalinist because it combined tyranny with populism and social engineering.<sup>17</sup> The Cheka used coercion to build orphanages and organize famine relief, to secure food supplies, uproot corruption in government and make sure the trains ran on time.<sup>18</sup> Dzerzhinsky was behind the first show trials,<sup>19</sup> he had a hand in the theory of the intensification of the class struggle<sup>20</sup> and the mummification of Lenin.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Dzerzhinsky fond (f.76) in the Rossiiskii Gosudarstvennyi Arkhiv Sotsial'no-Politicheskoi Istorii, Moscow [hereafter RGASPI]. His pre-1917 career was carefully monitored by the tsarist secret police (the Okhrana): See: 'F.E.Dzerzhinskii po arkhivnym materialam,' *Krasnyi arkhiv*, vol.16 (1926). Soviet hagiographies of him were produced by A.Khatskevich, N.Zubov, A.V.Tshkov.

<sup>14</sup> F.E.Dzerzhinskii, *Izbrannye stat'i i rechi, 1908-1926* (Moscow, 1947); idem, *Dnevnik i pis'ma* (Moscow, 1956); idem, *Prison Diary and Letters* (Moscow, 1959); idem, *Izbrannye proizvedeniia* (Moscow, 1967).

<sup>15</sup> As Donald Rayfield put it in his book *Stalin and his hangmen: an authoritative portrait of the tyrant and the men who served him* (London, 2004), p.55: 'It was the symbiosis of Dzierzynski and Stalin which would determine the fate of the USSR after Lenin fell ill and died.'

<sup>16</sup> Leggett, *The Cheka*, p.19

<sup>17</sup> On the need to engage popular support for the repressive actions of the security police see Dzerzhinsky's instructions to Menzhinsky, 24 Dec., 1924, RGASPI, f.76, op.3, d.345, ll.1-1ob.; & Dzerzhinsky to Unshlikht, 5 Sept.1922, RGASPI, f.76, op.3, d.303, ll.1-3.

<sup>18</sup> For an excellent collection of documents on this subject see A.M. Plekhanov, *VChK-OGPU v gody NEP, 1921-1928* (Moscow, 2006), pp.528-638.

<sup>19</sup> See Marc Jansen, *A Show trial under Lenin: The Trial of the Socialist Revolutionaries, Moscow 1922* (trans. Jean Sanders, London, 1982), p.27-28.

<sup>20</sup> RGASPI, f.17, op.84, d.228, l.52 – A joint circular by Dzerzhinsky and Molotov in February 1921: 'Having lost the battle on the external front, the counter-revolution is focusing its efforts on overthrowing Soviet power from within. It will use any means to attain this goal, drawing on all of its experience, all of its techniques of betrayal.' In other words, they asserted that the enemy became more secretive, devious and vicious the closer it came to defeat. On Stalin's advocacy of the theory see J.V. Stalin, *Works*, vol.12 (Moscow, 1954), pp.37-42. Bukharin quarrelled with Dzerzhinsky over this before he did with Stalin, see RGASPI, f.76, op.3, d.345, ll.1-2ob.

<sup>21</sup> Benno Enkker, 'The Origins and intentions of the Lenin Cult,' in Ian Thatcher, *Regime and Society in Twentieth Century Russia* (London, 1999), pp.118-28.

Yet the timing of his death has meant that Dzerzhinsky remains an enigmatic figure vis-à-vis Stalinism, leaving the stage at a crucial moment in the power struggle: July 1926. It is unclear which camp he would have joined two years later when Stalin and Bukharin fell out.<sup>22</sup> In the last weeks of his life he appears to have grown weary of the inner-Party squabbles: ‘If we do not find the correct policy and pace of development our opposition will grow and the country will find its dictator, the gravedigger of the Revolution irrespective of the beautiful feathers on his costume. Almost all dictators nowadays– Mussolini, Pilsudski– are former reds.’<sup>23</sup> Stalin clearly had some doubts as to whether his faith had been pure. In a speech to the Military Council on 2 June 1937 he claimed that Dzerzhinsky had at one stage been ‘an active Trotskyist who tried to use the GPU in defence of Trotsky.’<sup>24</sup>

In this regard Dzerzhinsky embodies one of the central problems in understanding Stalinism: the transition from Leninism. He served Lenin and Stalin for equal periods of time, his loyalties divided almost equally between both. His experiment with the Cheka was a stage in the evolutionary process of natural selection, of trial and error, from Leninism to Stalinism. The psychological conundrum of this transition is perhaps more pronounced in his case than of any other leading Bolshevik, because the fall was more precipitous, as Isaac Deutscher observed: ‘[the Bolsheviks] looked for a man with absolutely clean hands to do the “dirty work” [of the secret police]; and they found such a man in Dzerzhinsky. He was incorruptible, selfless, and intrepid– a soul of deep poetic sensibility, constantly stirred to compassion for the weak and the suffering. At the same time his devotion to the cause was so intense that it made him a fanatic who would shrink from no act of terror as long he was convinced that it was necessary for the cause. Living in permanent tension between his lofty idealism and the butchery which was his daily job, high-strung, his life-force burning itself out like a flame, he was regarded by his comrades as the strange “saint of the revolution” of the Savonarola breed. It was his misfortune that his incorruptible character was not allied to a strong and discriminating

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<sup>22</sup> See in particular David M. Woodruff, ‘The Politburo on Gold, Industrialization, and the International Economy, 1925-1926,’ in Paul Gregory and Norman Naimark (eds.), *The Lost Politburo Transcripts* (Yale UP, 2008).

<sup>23</sup> RGASPI, f.76, op.2, d.270, ll.32-33: Dzerzhinsky letter to Kuibyshev 3 July 1926.

<sup>24</sup> RGASPI f.558, op.11, d.1120, ll.29-32.

mind.<sup>25</sup> Thus, Dzerzhinsky's biography reflects the Russian Revolution's Faustian tragedy: the pact with violence, lawlessness and deceit that led to the descent into Stalinism.<sup>26</sup> This story of degeneration from high utopian goals to sordid dystopian reality brings us a step closer to understanding the central problem of Stalinism – a question for all social projects inspired by the ideas of the Enlightenment – as Solzhenitsyn put it: 'Where did this wolf-tribe appear from among our people? Does it really stem from our own roots? Our own blood?'<sup>27</sup>

### **Children of the borderlands**

The childhood of a biographical subject is essential in understanding the development of character through the interaction between temperament and experience. What we find in the case of Felix Dzerzhinsky is that it shares many parallels in this regard with those of both Lenin and Stalin. They came from roughly the same generation, Dzerzhinsky was born a year before Stalin, seven years after Lenin, on 11 September 1877, and whilst many of their experiences were merely coincidental to all of this period, there are deeper connections which are so striking that they suggest something more than coincidence. They all grew up in provincial, but not remote, parts of the Russian empire. Like Lenin, Felix was raised in the peace and quiet of the countryside in an intellectual middle-class family (neighbours recalled that the Dzerzhinsky home was run like a schoolhouse), with claims to minor aristocratic status. Dzerzhinsky's father, like Lenin's, had been a Maths and Physics teacher (numbering Anton Chekhov among his pupils). Edmund Dzerzhinsky retired from his post in the Crimea due to ill-health to spend the last of his days on the family estate – Dzierzynowo – back in his native Poland, dying when Felix was just five. Their high-born and pedagogic origins were at the root of both Lenin and Dzerzhinsky's approach to revolution: Lenin's concept of Party membership – like some kind of exclusive order of samurai properly educated by him to a satisfactory level of 'consciousness' – was replicated in Dzerzhinsky's schoolmasterly approach to training

<sup>25</sup> Isaac Deutscher, *The Prophet Unarmed: Trotsky, 1921-1929* (London, 1970), p.85.

<sup>26</sup> On the Faustian theme see: B.Jaxa-Ronikier, *The Red Executioner Dzierzinski (The Good Heart)*, trans from Polish by Helen Heney (London, 1935) – published in Polish as, *Dzierzynski: "Czerwony kat"* (Warsaw, 1933); Roman Gul, *Dzerzhinskii-Menzhinskii-Peters-Latsis-Iagoda* (Paris, 1936); Anatolii Ivanov, *Neizvestnyi Dzerzhinskii: fakty i vymysly* (Moscow, 1994). See also Stanford University, Hoover Institution, Wrangel Collection, Box 147, on the Cheka and the report of the Denikin Commission.

<sup>27</sup> Alexander Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago* (London, 1979), p.160.



the *chekist* elite— like the sensei of an assassin’s guild littering his instructions with pithy aphorisms.

As far back as he could remember Felix lacked the restraining presence of a father, much like Joseph ‘Soso’ Dzhughashvili and (when he began to rebel) Lenin. Like Lenin, young Felix was surrounded by doting women and, unlike Stalin, he was not beaten as a child.<sup>28</sup> He was his mother’s favourite and extremely close to his oldest sister, Aldona, who through most of his childhood acted as his tutor, and later during his years in prison as his principal contact with the outside world. Like the Orthodox matriarch Keke Dzhughashvili, Dzerzhinsky’s Catholic mother was very religious. Like Soso Dzhughashvili, Felix was an outsider – they were both non-Russians living on the borderlands of the tsarist empire: black sheep even amongst their own people.<sup>29</sup> None of Felix’s seven brothers and sisters became a revolutionary. As children of the Russian empire Dzerzhinsky and Stalin could be seen as cases of what Isaiah Berlin called ‘borderland syndrome’: ‘an exaggerated sentiment or contempt for the dominant majority.’<sup>30</sup> With Dzerzhinsky and Stalin it was a bit of both. They were both unusual in their homelands in abandoning nationalism and in their ambivalent attitude to their fellow countrymen. Still the influence of their national origins remained crucial: the rise of the Beria clique was testament to the hold the Caucasus had on Stalin to the last, and Felix had been raised on his mother’s bedtime stories about the brutal tsarist repression of Polish independence and Catholic religion: ‘her stories taught me to hate every act of injustice. Their influence helped make me a revolutionary.’<sup>31</sup> He later confessed that ‘as a young boy, I dreamt of a cap of invisibility and of killing all Muscovites.’<sup>32</sup> As a youth Muscovites simply morphed in his imagination into the bourgeoisie.

Even before he rebelled Felix was unusual amongst his immediate family for the depth of his piety – his brothers all went on to become scientists and engineers, whereas Canon Law was the only subject Dzerzhinsky excelled at in school. Relatives, knowing Felix was too fond of the opposite sex ever to be truly happy as a Catholic priest, had to

<sup>28</sup> Dzerzhinsky, *Prison Diary and Letters*, p.149: Letter to Aldona, Nov. 1901.

<sup>29</sup> On the influence of Stalin’s Georgian roots see: R.G.Suny, ‘Beyond Psychohistory: The Young Stalin in Georgia,’ *Slavic Review*, 50 (Spring 1991); A. Rieber, ‘Stalin: Man of the Borderlands’ *American Historical Review*, 106 (2001), pp.165-91.

<sup>30</sup> Isaiah Berlin, *Against the Current* (London, 1980), p.258.

<sup>31</sup> Dzerzhinsky, *Prison Diary and Letters*, p.238: Letter to Zosia Dzierzynska, 24 June 1914.

<sup>32</sup> Qutd. in Blobaum, *Feliks Dzierzynski*, p.24

talk him out of his plans to enter a seminary. Still, the vestigial influence of religion in his behaviour, beliefs and expressions in letters and speeches as a revolutionary are clear to see: in his over-sensitised compassion and outrage at the suffering of others; his frequent use of religious language (redemption, sin, disciple, purity, hymn, paradise, hell, goodness, evil and so forth); repackaged Biblical morality (eg ‘a Chekist should have a fiery heart, a cool head and clean hands’ adapting the three theological virtues: faith, hope and charity); his hermetic worldview (all evil had a single source: the capitalist system); his ascetic diet in mortification of the flesh; his fixation on personal morality rather than the Marxist laws of history (this gave him common ground with his pious sister: ‘I loathe with every fibre all injustice,’ the young revolutionary told her ‘crime, drunkenness, excess, extravagance, brothels in which people sell their bodies or souls, or both’),<sup>33</sup> and his masochistic compulsion towards self-sacrifice, playing out his own melodramatic passion play in imitation of Christ (complete with the appearance of various Judas Iscariots).<sup>34</sup>

When he finally did abandon religion Felix was very specific about his reasons for doing so. Like Ivan Karamazov he suspected that the truly evil thing about the Church was that its grand inquisitors did not believe in God, and that they concealed the truth to preserve their power. ‘I detest priests,’ he told his sister in 1902 (after she had expressed the hope that the prodigal son would return to the bosom of Catholicism), ‘I hate them. They have cloaked the whole world in their black soutanes in which is concentrated all evil – crime, filth and prostitution; they spread darkness and preach submission.’<sup>35</sup> It is tempting to infer from this that he was what George Orwell called, ‘the sort of atheist who does not so much disbelieve in God as personally dislike Him.’<sup>36</sup> But it was deeper and more ‘scientific’ than that. He was angry at God, it seems, for not existing. ‘People have sought consolation and refuge from misfortune in thinking about a life in the hereafter, about justice beyond the grave,’ he wrote, ‘but for everyday purposes this is a sterile thought, because it cannot advance life and merely sanctifies and perpetuates

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<sup>33</sup> Dzerzhinsky, *Prison Diary and Letters*, p.147.

<sup>34</sup> A photograph from the David King Collection of Dzerzhinsky in a strange Christ-like Last Supper pose can be found in the recent glossy FSB celebration of Dzerzhinsky’s life: *Feliks Dzerzhinskii: K 130-letiiu so dnia rozhdeniia* (Moscow, 2007), p.55.

<sup>35</sup> Dzerzhinsky, *Prison diary and letters*, p.176: Letter to Aldona, 6 October 1902.

<sup>36</sup> George Orwell, *Down and Out in Paris and London* (1933), chpt.30.

misery, covering the earth in a mantle of mourning.<sup>37</sup> As a youth Dzerzhinsky's eldest brother, Stanislaw, mocked his piety, asking what he would do if he ever stopped believing in God. Felix replied that he would blow his brains out. His later appetite for destruction – of himself and all that was corrupt in the world – suggests that he saw the revolution as a means of carrying out this bitter oath by other means. And he still staked everything on his beliefs: "Life would not be worth living," he wrote from his jail cell, 'were it not for the light shown to humanity by the star of socialism, the star of the future.'<sup>38</sup>

This attitude again suggests parallels with Stalin. Donald Rayfield has observed: "Stalin's atheism was neither abrupt nor complete. His atheism was a rebellion against God rather than a disavowal of the deity... He took with him into power the deeply held conviction that the duty of the ruler was not to make his subjects happy but to prepare their souls for the next world."<sup>39</sup> In a similar vein, Felix acknowledged that it was his religious convictions which set him on the path to revolution, even describing his conversion *to* atheism in religious terms 'now that I have tasted of the tree of knowledge I cannot turn back... [from the life of a revolutionary] ... to overturn the golden calf.'<sup>40</sup> He saw nothing contradictory in this: religion seemed at first the path to conquering his fear of death and making sense of suffering in the world, but this striving for meaning led him in adolescence to Darwin, Hegel, Marx and thus exposed the 'scientific' flaws in religion. Felix found meaning and purpose to continue his pious mission to do good in this world through the materialist and utilitarian philosophers, to be *useful* and thus 'to be a bright torch for others, to be able to shed light– that is the supreme happiness which man can achieve. He who achieves this, fears neither suffering, nor pain, nor sorrow, nor need. Death no longer holds terrors for him...'<sup>41</sup> As with many of his soul-searching asides, this clearly echoes passages from the Bible: Proverbs 4:18 – 'the path of the just is as the shining light, that shines more and more unto the perfect day' – and Romans 3:13 – 'rulers hold no terror for those who do right.'

<sup>37</sup> Dzerzhinsky, *Prison diary and letters*, pp.224-25: Letter to Aldona, 16 March 1914.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.31-32: Prison diary entry, 10 May 1908.

<sup>39</sup> Rayfield, *Stalin's Hangmen*, p.12. On the impact of the seminary on Stalin see Moshe Lewin, *The Soviet Century* (London, 2005), pp.35-38.

<sup>40</sup> Dzerzhinsky, *Prison diary and letters*, p.158 (Letter to Aldona, 2 Jan. 1902) & p.140 (Letter to Aldona, 13 March 1899).

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p.207: Letter to Aldona, 16 June 1913.

And so even after Felix rejected organized religion his younger sister, Jadwiga, claimed: 'He loved Jesus very much... his commandments were deeply embedded in his heart... and he continued to respect Christ.'<sup>42</sup> The young atheist even confessed to slipping back into the old ways on occasion, for example, when he narrowly escaped drowning in his flight from Siberia in 1902 Felix recalled whilst crawling up the riverbank to safety, 'I crossed myself and thanked God for saving my life.'<sup>43</sup> His family was convinced that one day he would return to the fold. Aldona paid (till her dying day at the age of 96) for a regular Mass to pray for her godless brother's immortal soul in the hope of reducing the length of his stay in purgatory.

Dzerzhinsky's life reflects the Stalinist shift in Russian society as a whole from Christianity to Communism. The mindset of the first generation of Soviet rulers and citizens was not a blank slate ready to passively accept the imprint of new ideas, but rather a partially erased palimpsest: new ink settled into old grooves as the ethics of the new Marxist-Leninist-Stalinist worldview flowed down neural pathways formed by a childhood education in religious dogma. Born into a spiritual age before Nietzsche's 'death of God', the majority of young Communists were still traumatised by the departure of the eternal father figure; they were never going to find consolation in Lenin's arid materialism.<sup>44</sup> There is an essential vagueness to Dzerzhinsky's misty faith in the idea of revolution, a mysticism that would lead him to shift allegiance from Lenin to Stalin. Stalinism had at its heart the idea of submission to an unknowable higher authority. Dzerzhinsky surrendered himself to the idea of revolution without dwelling at any great length on what 'revolution' actually meant. He slid so easily into this pattern of

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<sup>42</sup> *Argumenty i fakty*, 19 July 2006: Jadwiga went to explain his partial conversion: 'In 1894 Felix became keen on the philosophical books... which, being materialistic, diverted his attention from religion. Yet Felix has respected the person of Christ for a long time, and maybe, I do not know for sure, up to his death.'

<sup>43</sup> RGASPI, f.76, op.4, d.17, l.2.

<sup>44</sup> On Bolshevism as a secular religion see: A.V. Lunacharsky, *Religion and Socialism* (1908-1911); S.Bulgakov, 'Heroism and Asceticism: Reflections on the Religious Nature of the Russian Intelligentsia,' in B. Shragin & A. Todd (eds.), *Landmarks*, trans. A. Schwartz (New York, 1977); Richard L.Hernandez, 'The Confessions of Semën Kanatchikov: A Bolshevik Memoir as Spiritual Biography,' *The Russian Review*, 60 (Jan.2001), pp.13-35.

submission because his vague notion of ‘revolution’ filled a God-shaped hole. Communism was for Dzerzhinsky, as it was for Stalin, truly a political religion.<sup>45</sup>

### Youth in the underground

Dzerzhinsky’s idyllic childhood ended in 1887 when he moved to Vil’no (Vilnius) to live with relatives and attend with his two older brothers the prestigious *gimnaziia* (grammar school). Like Lenin this meant he received a classical education, but like Stalin he planned to be a priest. Like Stalin, it was probably the oppressive atmosphere of school-life which turned him into a revolutionary: the enforced speaking of Russian, Orthodox services and prayers for the tsar, the informers, the corporal punishment, and even the schoolhouse itself was haunted by tsarist oppression – occupying buildings of the old university which had been closed down after the Polish uprising of 1863. But this was not the only reason why Dzerzhinsky strayed from the path of respectability, like both Lenin and Stalin, his conversion coincided with a teenage trauma: In 1892 he accidentally killed his sister Wanda whilst playing with a loaded rifle on the family estate. He did not return home until 1919, in the wake of another family tragedy (his brother had been murdered in 1917 at Dzierzynowo by deserters from the Russian army). In his teenage years Felix progressively lost interest in school and was disciplined for unruly behaviour. At this point he became involved with radical groups of likeminded students. On Gediminas Hill, looking down on the old centre of Vil’no, he gathered with friends in 1894 and swore a solemn oath – in the style of Ogarev or Herzen on Moscow’s Sparrow Hills – to fight ‘evil’ for the rest of their days. The oath was prompted not by class war, but by the tsarist government’s policies of religious persecution in Lithuania. Felix later admitted that he had not yet identified the true enemy: ‘I reacted at once to every injustice and every humiliation suffered by the people, and I developed a loathing for evil. But I had to grope my way blindly, without any guidance or instruction.’<sup>46</sup> Eventually he found directions to the path of the righteous in 1895 when he read the Erfurt Programme. Marxism clearly pointed the way and so he joined the Social Democratic Party. In January 1896 his

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<sup>45</sup> The term ‘political religion’ dates back to Condorcet’s criticism of the education policies of the French Revolution in 1791. The first systematic work focussing on its application to totalitarianism was Eric Voegelin’s *Die Politischen Religionen* (Vienna, 1938).

<sup>46</sup> Dzerzhinsky, *Prison Diary and Letters*, pp.238-39: Letter to Zosia, 24 June 1914.

mother, from whom he'd hidden his atheism, died. Felix, eighteen years old and a devoted son, was devastated. He left school without graduating, gave himself body and soul to the revolutionary cause, and began work agitating in the local factories.

The simplest way to summarise Dzerzhinsky's career from this time to the revolution is to look at it as a twenty year period of only intermittent activity, broken up by six arrests, three escapes and long sojourns in prison and exile – around eleven years in jail and Siberia: late 1897 to August 1899; February 1900 to August 1902; July 1905 to October 1905; December 1906 to June 1907; April 1908 to November 1909; September 1912 to March 1917.<sup>47</sup> His experiences here are again similar to those of Stalin, and can be summed up in three themes: the close proximity of death, the omnipresence of violence, and the necessity of conspiracy. This infused both *chekism* and Stalinism with three of their chief characteristics: impatience, the readiness to fall back on violence as a first (rather than a last) resort and paranoia.

Like both Lenin and Stalin, illness and mortality haunted Dzerzhinsky's young adulthood. His case was if anything more pronounced because the life of a jailbird ruined his health. In August 1898 the twenty-year old began his first journey into internal exile, banished by the state to Viatka province. He was cooped up for most of the journey in the hold of steamboats in filthy and overcrowded conditions. As a result he developed trachoma in both of his eyes. The infection very nearly blinded him. Once he arrived at his place of exile he found work in a tobacco factory. This seriously damaged his lungs. Doctors told him that he had tuberculosis and that he did not have long to live. Felix took the news stoically: 'He who lives as I do,' he told his sister 'cannot live very long.'<sup>48</sup> After his second arrest in February 1900, Dzerzhinsky was consigned to the Warsaw fortress, and after two years he was sentenced to a further five years in Siberia, but escaped en route. Already coughing blood, Dzerzhinsky took the first of many rest-cures in Switzerland at the end of 1902; a second in the Polish mountain resort of Zakopane in May 1903; and a third in the summer of 1904 again in Switzerland with his fiancé, a Jewish revolutionary, Julia Goldman. She also suffered from tuberculosis, and died his

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<sup>47</sup> Escape from tsarist prisons appeared to be a relatively easy task. See: Edward Ellis Smith, *The Young Stalin* (London, 1968), pp.448-54: Stalin himself escaped from exile and prison on an estimated thirteen occasions: Smith saw this as evidence that Stalin was an Okhrana agent.

<sup>48</sup> Dzerzhinsky, *Prison Diary and Letters*, p.143: Letter to Aldona, 21 Oct. 1901.

arms on 4 June 1904. Three more years in prison followed. Like Dostoevsky, Felix called it ‘the house of the dead’. Incarceration was a constant memento mori: ‘There is nothing to take the eye,’ he wrote, “nothing to soothe one’s frayed nerves, ... the ceiling resembles a coffin lid, there is the treacherous peephole in the door, and the ghastly, pale daylight. And on the other side of the door the hushed tread of the gendarme who every now and then raises the flap of the peephole to make sure that the victim has not cheated the hangman.”<sup>49</sup> His prison diaries of 1908-09, written from his confinement in the Warsaw fortress, were accompanied by the sound of guards building scaffolds to execute revolutionaries.<sup>50</sup> Hundreds passed through the ‘death-cells’ during his stay 1908-09. Felix was not alone in taking a macabre interest in the subject: ‘The prison authorities now make a detailed record of the way in which the doomed men behave during execution,’ he wrote. ‘Their words are written down and their groans and death agony noted. This is done for “scientific” purposes.’<sup>51</sup> His final stay in prison from 1912 to 1917 was the most gruelling of all. He was forced to wear in leg-irons. As a result he spent most of 1916 in hospital, still in manacles. Too weak to carry out hard labour (*katorga*) he served the remainder of his time sewing buttons onto army uniforms.

Violence was also a constant feature of Dzerzhinsky’s life in the underground. His attempts at agitprop in the taverns of Vil’no and Kovno (Kaunas) regularly resulted in barroom brawls. Soviet biographers claimed that after his first arrest: ‘He was repeatedly locked up in the punishment cell without food or water, and was several times beaten unconscious.’<sup>52</sup> These were the first of many hidings he was to receive in prison. The last occurred in Butyrka in Moscow, 1914. It left him with few teeth, partially paralysed face muscles and a lopsided smile. The revolutionary struggle was more bloody on the fringes of the tsarist empire, where Dzerzhinsky and Stalin came to manhood, than in the Russian heartland.<sup>53</sup> Although maltreatment undoubtedly occurred throughout the

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., p.34: Diary entry, 14 May 1908.

<sup>50</sup> First published in *Przegląd Socjal-demokratyczny*, nos 16-19 (1909-1910).

<sup>51</sup> Dzerzhinsky, *Prison diary and letters*, p.118: diary entry 11 July 1909

<sup>52</sup> Felix Dzerzhinsky: *A Biography* Ed. S.S.Khronov et al. Trans Natalia Belskaya (Moscow, 1977), p.23. A. Petrenko, ‘Pamiati tov. Iuzefa,’ *Katorga i ssylka*, no.27 (1926), pp.188-92. Iu. Krasnyi, “F.E.Dzerzhinskii. Materialy o zhizni i podpol’noi deiatel’nosti,” *Proletarskaia revoliutsiia*, no.9 (1926), pp.5-54

<sup>53</sup> On violence in the Caucasus see Jorg Baberowski, *Der Feind ist überall: Stalinismus im Kaukasus* (Munich, 2003).

prison system, it was not officially sanctioned.<sup>54</sup> Clear evidence that the use of torture by police was commonplace is to be found only in the western borderlands: the Krakow newspaper 'New Reform' printed witness statements in 1910 that a Captain Aleksandrov in the Warsaw branch of the Okhrana had devised 'machines for crushing and smashing fingers during questioning.'<sup>55</sup> Dzerzhinsky himself helped bring these stories to light, circulating them in his published prison diaries in 1909, reporting on the physical and mental torture – the sadism, the hangings, and the mock executions.<sup>56</sup> These accounts were corroborated by an Okhrana defector.<sup>57</sup> There were some accusations of torture also at the Riga branch of the Okhrana. Iakov Peters, the future operational head of the Cheka, had no fingernails. He said that they had been torn out whilst being interrogated in Riga.<sup>58</sup>

Peters' and Dzerzhinsky's experiences were typical of the majority of the senior ranks of the early Soviet security police: "In our Chekas," Dzerzhinsky boasted, "the majority of workers are old revolutionaries who passed through the tsarist autocracy's school of hard knocks [*surovaia shkola*]."<sup>59</sup> The senior-most staff came almost exclusively from the borderlands: six Poles, three Latvians, eight Russians (one of them Jewish, one brought up abroad), one Ukrainian, one Armenian, and one Georgian. Past experience in the underground was a priority in recruitment.<sup>60</sup> A survey of the 69 senior-most chekists in 1920 found that all were Party members, and that 50 had joined before the October Revolution.<sup>61</sup> The preference for veterans of the underground persisted throughout the 1920s.<sup>62</sup>

<sup>54</sup> GARF, f.102, op.260, d.17, *Tsirkuliary*, l.14 30 April 1907 reminds security police that according to the criminal code articles 1035 (11) and 1035 (20) prisoners have a right to ask for a witness to be present during interrogations.

<sup>55</sup> Cutting from *Nowa reforma* (no.54) entitled 'Secrets of the Security Section', 1 Feb. 1910: GARF, f.102, op.240, d.38, l.19.

<sup>56</sup> Dzerzhinsky, *Prison Diary and Letters*, pp.111-17: diary entries 25 June, 26 June & 1 July 1909.

<sup>57</sup> A former employee of Warsaw Okhrana claimed that they had a 'torture chamber': M.E.Bakai, 'Iz zapisok M.E.Bakaia,' *Byloe*, nos.9/10 (Paris 1909), p.194. See also the last head of the Okhrana, I.P.Vasil'ev's statement to the Extraordinary Investigatory Commission, qutd. in: P. E. Shchegolev, *Okhrannik, agenty, palachii* (Moscow, 1992), p.224.

<sup>58</sup> Karl Mitsit ("Martyn"), 'O pytakh v Rizhskom sysknom otdelenii,' *Byloe*, 13 (Paris 1910), pp.139-48.

<sup>59</sup> Dzerzhinsky's speech at the Fourth Cheka Conference, 6 Feb.1920 in Tsentral'nyi Arkhiv Federal'noi Sluzhbi Bezopasnosti, Moscow [hereafter TsAFSB], f.1, op.4, d.6, ll.142-44.

<sup>60</sup> A. Zdanovich, 'Chetyre popytki Dzerzhinskogo,' available on the FSB website: <http://www.fsb.ru> – uploaded 4/9/1998.

<sup>61</sup> TsAFSB, f.1, op.4, d.6, l.160: 'Iz otcheta mandatnoi komissii 4-i konferentsiia ChK, 6 Feb. 1920.'

<sup>62</sup> TsAFSB, f.2, op.10, d.190, l.351: Lubianka to regional GPUs in October 1927 on the importance of the 'most responsible work' going to Party members who had joined before the Revolution. On continuity of



Bukharin later claimed that the brutalisation of the secret police only occurred *after* Collectivization, which brought about a ‘profound psychological change in those Communists who took part in the campaign. Instead of going mad, they accepted terror as a normal administrative method.’<sup>63</sup> But most of the leaders of the original Cheka had grown used to violence as a normal part of the struggle even before the revolution. Their later experiences merely intensified this tendency. This is in marked contrast to the experiences of the intellectual émigrés around Lenin, Zinoviev, Bukharin and Trotsky, who chose to pursue a less perilous revolutionary struggle before 1917 *outside* the Russian empire. And this is the point where Dzerzhinsky’s chekist mindset departed from Leninism and fused with Stalinism. Stalin also placed particular emphasis on his heroic and brutal pre-revolutionary past fighting the tsar in the Caucasus.<sup>64</sup> He, like Dzerzhinsky, tended to work closest with fellow veterans from his particular field of combat.<sup>65</sup> This was the foundation of the bond between Dzerzhinsky and Stalin which began with their cooperation over the use of harsh repressive measures in Tsaritsyn and Perm in 1919: violence pursued in spite the complaints of leading Bolsheviks.<sup>66</sup> This bond was sealed in November 1922 when Dzerzhinsky placed himself in Stalin’s camp against Lenin in defence of Stalin’s allies and their use of violence in the Caucasus.<sup>67</sup>

Ultimately though, both Dzerzhinsky and Stalin’s temperaments were shaped not principally by the *physical* hardship of life in the underground, but rather by the *mental* scars that went with it.<sup>68</sup> The necessity of conspiracy as a way of life was key to this.<sup>69</sup>

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personnel from 1920s to 1930s see K.V. Skorkin & N.V. Petrov, *Kto rukovodil NKVD, 1934-1941* (Moscow, 1999), p.498; A.Kokurin & N.Petrov, ‘GPU-OGPU, 1922-1928 gg.’ *Svobodnaia mysl*, no.7 (1998), pp.110-125.

<sup>63</sup> Bukharin quoted in Boris Nicolaevsky, *Power and the Soviet Elite* (New York, 1965), pp.18-19.

<sup>64</sup> F. Makharadze’s book on the history of the struggle in the Caucasus, *Ocherki revoliutsionnogo dvizheniia v Zakavkaz’i* (Tiflis, 1927), fell into disfavour – at Stalin’s prompting in 1931 – for not celebrating leading role of Stalin sufficiently. Beria took credit for a group-authored hagiography of Stalin focussing on his life in the underground: ‘On the History of the Bolshevik Organisation in Transcaucasia’, launched by a series of public lectures in Tbilisi July 1935.

<sup>65</sup> On Stalinist terror as an outgrowth of the struggle in the Caucasus see Jörg Baberowski, *Der Rote Terror: Die Geschichte des Stalinismus* (Munich, 2003), pp.7-16.

<sup>66</sup> See Roger Argenbright, ‘Red Tsaritsyn: precursor of Stalinist terror,’ *Revolutionary Russia*, vol.4, no.2 (Dec.1991), pp.157-83. George Leggett, ‘The Cheka and a Crisis of Communist Conscience,’ *Survey* Vol. 25 (1980), pp. 122-137.

<sup>67</sup> Richard Pipes, *The Formation of the Soviet Union, 1917-23* (London, 1954), p.281

<sup>68</sup> On the formative imprint of Stalin’s pre-revolutionary life on Stalinism see in particular Simon Sebag-Montefiore, *Young Stalin* (London, 2007).

The secret revolutionary cells provided comradeship, but they were also riddled with police agents. This meant that the people who were closest to the young revolutionaries were also those who could do them the most harm. Dzerzhinsky's first arrest was the result of betrayal by a comrade. And when he entered jail he found that 'all the prisoners in my vicinity are the victims of informers.'<sup>70</sup> Informers – 'their faces are pale masks... with the mark of Cain on their brows'<sup>71</sup> – also worked amongst the convicts and exiles in Siberia. Consequently young Felix avoided socializing. He broke off his relations with the first woman he loved in order to pursue his revolutionary career.<sup>72</sup> And when he finally did wed he barely saw his wife for the first eight years of marriage, separated by prison and exile. His only child – born in prison – was seven years old before he first recalled meeting his father. Dzerzhinsky's first escape from exile in August 1899 was motivated more than anything else by a sense of isolation, 'the place,' he wrote 'was unendurably lonely.'<sup>73</sup> He confessed that 'solitary confinement has left its mark', both on his view of the world – 'I can neither hate nor love by halves' – and on his own temperament– 'bouts of depression are followed by a feeling of being on top of the world.'<sup>74</sup> He was torn between a love for humanity and a bitter thirst for revenge: 'the day will come when I shall be free and they will pay for everything,' he wrote.<sup>75</sup> He even introspectively perceived his physical ailments in conspiratorial terms: 'I am the carrier of an enemy within [viz., TB],' he wrote, 'an enemy who is constantly on the go, who may relinquish his attacks for a moment only to renew the struggle later on.'<sup>76</sup>

Stalin also suffered from an isolating, pathological suspiciousness to the point where he too saw enemies everywhere, as he told Khrushchev: "I'm a rotten person. I

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<sup>69</sup> See Edward Ellis Smith, *The Young Stalin* (London, 1968), pp.448-54: Stalin spent as much time in the underground and prison as Dzerzhinsky, escaping on an estimated thirteen occasions. Smith saw this as evidence that Stalin was even more heavily immersed in the world of conspiracy, working as an Okhrana agent. Cf. Jerzy Ochmanski, *Rewolucyjna działalność Feliksa Dzierżyńskiego na Litwie w końcu XIX wieku* (Poznań, 1969).

<sup>70</sup> Dzerzhinsky, *Prison Diary and Letters*, p.27: diary entry 9 May 1908.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, p.69: diary entry 6 September 1908.

<sup>72</sup> See A.M. Plekhanov (ed.), *Ja vas liubliu... Pis'ma Feliksa Dzerzhinskogo Margarite Nikolaevoi* (Moscow, 2007); & F.E.Dzerzhinskii, 'Eto bylo v sele Kaigorodskom. Nepublikovannye pis'ma,' *Moskva*, no.10 (1972), pp.160-78.

<sup>73</sup> Dzerzhinsky, *Prison Diary and Letters*, p.14.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, p.143: Letter to Aldona, 21 Oct. 1901.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, p.132: Letter to Aldona, 19 Sept. 1898.

<sup>76</sup> Dzerzhinsky, *Prison Diary and Letters*, p.181: Letter to Aldona, 8 May/25 April 1903.

don't trust anybody. I don't even trust myself.”<sup>77</sup> Like Dzerzhinsky, Stalin was a paradoxical youth and Stalinism was a paradoxical phenomenon – benevolent goals coupled with murderous methods, rationalist materialism coupled with a quasi-religious faith. J. Arch Getty has pointed out that Stalinism evolved in ‘zigs and zags’<sup>78</sup> and was characterised by ‘schizophrenic discourse.’<sup>79</sup> This has often been noticed, and consequently many historians have long asserted that Stalinism had psychological origins. Most (though not Getty) have tended to root it singly in Stalin’s own divided soul – his self-love battling with his self-loathing.<sup>80</sup> The overlap of experience and temperament between Stalin and Dzerzhinsky suggests that Stalinism was more the product of a shared group mentality, rather than just that of an individual. This group psychology was most pronounced in the Soviet secret police, as Victor Serge noted: “The only temperaments that devote themselves willingly and tenaciously to this task of ‘internal defence’ were those characterised by suspicion, embitterment, harshness and sadism. Long standing inferiority complexes and memories of humiliation and sufferings in the Tsar’s jails rendered them intractable, and since professional degeneration has rapid effects, the Chekas inevitably consisted of perverted men tending to see conspiracy everywhere and to live in the midst of perpetual conspiracy themselves.”<sup>81</sup>

Thus the story of Dzerzhinsky’s youth is important because it describes the formative years of the kind of individual who made Stalinism possible. He is more typical in fact than Stalin himself; after all in Soviet propaganda Stalin and Lenin were held to be unique, only one man could be leader, their genius was for veneration not imitation. Whereas Dzerzhinsky was depicted as a loyal follower of the Party line, as such he ‘seems to have functioned as a mimetic figure, who, unlike Lenin, could be “cloned”’.<sup>82</sup> As Mayakovsky put it: ‘To any youth thinking over his future, deciding on

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<sup>77</sup> Nikita Khrushchev, *Memoirs*, vol.2 (Pennsylvania State UP, 1999), p.84.

<sup>78</sup> J. Arch Getty & Oleg Naumov (eds.), *The Road to Terror: Stalin and the Self-Destruction of the Bolsheviks, 1932-1939* (Yale UP, 1999), pp.7 & 580.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, p.575.

<sup>80</sup> The outstanding work in this regard is Robert C. Tucker’s *Stalin as Revolutionary, 1879-1929: A Study in History and Personality* (New York, 1973). See also Daniel Rancour-Laferriere, ‘The Mind of Stalin: A Psychoanalytic Approach,’ & Gustav Bychkowski, ‘Joseph V. Stalin: Paranoia and the Dictatorship of the Proletariat,’ in *The Psychoanalytic interpretation of history*, ed. Benjamin B. Wolman (New York, 1971).

<sup>81</sup> Quoted in Leggett, *The Cheka*, p.189.

<sup>82</sup> Julie Fedor, *Russia and the Cult of State Security: The Chekist tradition, from Lenin to Putin* (Abingdon, Oxon, 2011), p.194.

whom to model his life, I shall tell, without hesitating, “Base it on Comrade Dzerzhinsky.”” Iron Felix embodied the ideals that made Stalinism possible: ‘moral purity’, total loyalty, self-sacrifice, ruthlessness, tireless diligence and, crucially, after serving his purpose he died a timely death.<sup>83</sup> The first half of Stalin’s reign was a morbid age, recognised even at the time as a hiatus between two world wars, the generation that advanced through this no-man’s land – exhausted, scarred and fatally sullied by the struggle – was expected to annihilate the previous generation and then sacrifice itself for the happiness of the next. Dzerzhinsky embraced and embodied this idea: ‘the fruits of the revolution should not go to us, but to them [the next generation].’<sup>84</sup> This was a truth widely acknowledged: ‘Lenin often ridiculed so-called old Bolsheviks,’ said Trotsky, ‘and even said that at fifty revolutionaries should be sent to join their forefathers.’<sup>85</sup> Felix was remarkably obliging in this regard: he died of a heart attack just a month shy of his forty-ninth birthday.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> For some excellent insights on the quasi-religious aspects to the Dzerzhinsky cult see: Andrei Sinyavsky, *Soviet Civilization: A Cultural History* (1990), pp. 125-34.

<sup>84</sup> Dzerzhinsky’s letter to Lunacharsky 21 January 1921 on the creation of orphanages, quoted A.I. Valakhanovich, *Feliks Edmundovich Dzerzhinskii* (Minsk, 1997), p.128.

<sup>85</sup> Quoted in Edvard Radzinsky, *Stalin* (London, 1996), pp.310-11.

<sup>86</sup> This article was completed thanks to funding from the British Academy Post-Doctoral Fellowships scheme, its Elisabeth Barker endowment and the Carnegie Trust for the Universities of Scotland.